

Spirituality Revisited¹
Rev. Myke Johnson
September 18, 2005
Allen Avenue UU Church

There are only two ways to live . . .
one is as though nothing is a miracle. . . the other is as if everything is.
Albert Einstein

Excerpt from “Moses & the Shepherd” by the Sufi mystic & poet Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks.²

Ways of worshipping are not to be ranked as better
or worse than one another...
Forget phraseology.
I want burning...
Be friends
with your burning. ...
...those who pay attention to ways of behaving
and speaking are one sort.
Lovers who burn
are another.
The love-religion has no code or doctrine.

Sermon:

From my earliest memories, I knew that it was risky to talk about spirituality. It was sure to mark you as strange or crazy, or get you into trouble. I don't even know how or where I learned this. But in my immediate family, spirituality was an ever-present force. We were Catholics, but it was something more than that. My father didn't just believe in God, he was in love with God. He had called out to God, and experienced an answer. It filled his life like a contagious fire.

A spark of that fire ignited in my heart, too. I was hungry for this burning love. But I was also afraid of what other people would think of me. It seemed to me that most people said they believed in God, but they didn't really expect anything to come of it. So I learned to keep certain things hidden—especially this solitary and mysterious experience of longing and feeling loved.

We have a woefully inadequate vocabulary to describe spiritual experiences. Even the word *spiritual* is problematic. It has a history of meaning some sort of reality apart from and more important than the physical world. But that was not its original meaning.

The word *spiritual* comes from the Latin root *spirare*, which means *to breathe*. When we breathe, we are alive. We are in relationship, physically, to the world around us, to all other breathers of air: all the animals and the birds and the trees and the plants. It is first of all a chemical exchange. Breathing is life shared among many beings. When we stop breathing, we

die. Breathing is the first prayer. In some traditions, the primary spiritual practice is to pay attention to our breathing. Spirituality is first of all about what inspires us, what brings us to life.

Some people have been turned off by the idea of spirituality, because they associate it with something fantastical and irrational, something that requires accepting beliefs that don't make sense, that don't fit reality. That is not what Unitarian Universalists mean, when we encourage each other to spiritual growth. Spirituality is not about belief, but about experience. To be spiritual means to wake up to our own awareness of the larger reality of which we are a part. To be spiritual means to wake up to our real questions, our real feelings, our confusions, our curiosities, our hungers. Our emphasis on experience is why we can include within our UU ranks groups as different from each other as pagans and humanists.

A well-known pagan writer explains her distinction between beliefs and experience. Referring to the spirituality of the Goddess, Starhawk wrote,

“People often ask me if I *believe* in the Goddess. I reply, ‘Do you believe in rocks?’ ... The phrase ‘believe *in*’ itself implies that we cannot know the Goddess, that she is somehow intangible, incomprehensible. But we do not *believe* in rocks—we may see them, touch them, dig them out of our gardens, or stop small children from throwing them at each other. We know them, we connect with them. In the Craft, we do not *believe* in the Goddess—we connect with her; through the moon, the stars, the ocean, the earth, through trees, animals, through other human beings, through ourselves. She is here. She is within us all.”³

In a humanist vein, my UU colleague, Rev. Roger Cowan, believes “that religion is about this world, about bringing justice and mercy and the power of love into life here and now.” Yet he, too, has a spiritual practice: he “begins each morning with devotional readings and a time of silence and prayer.” Why? He says, “I need a quiet time. I need to express my gratitude. I need humility. I pray because—alone—I am not enough and also I am too much. I express gratitude for the gift of aliveness. I assert my oneness with you and all humankind and all creation. When I pray, I acknowledge that God is not me.”⁴

The emphasis on experience over dogma makes common ground between pagans and humanists and those of other beliefs within our UU community. Each can follow the path that fits their own experience of reality. As Unitarian Universalists, we are not asked to *believe* in a particular spirituality, but to be open to the possibility that people's spiritual experiences have validity, even if they are different from our own.

This emphasis on experience can also be found among the mystics of all the great religious traditions. Their very different religious creeds fall into insignificance, in the light of a common experience of wonder and gratitude and connection. The poet Rumi, a Sufi mystic in the tradition of Islam, said that language doesn't matter, the words we use don't matter. Spirituality is not about what we believe, but what we feel. What matters is seeing, touching, knowing, loving. What matters is the burning of our hearts. He says we must become friends with our burning.

When I venture inside my own heart, I am aware of its burning. I am aware of deep longings, of hungers that feel almost like pain, like restlessness. It is difficult to feel this and I am tempted to eat a chocolate bar, or whatever else might fill up that empty place. But instead of escaping or fixing it, I invite myself to try to be present with it. I breathe into the longing and let myself experience the hunger. Is this what it means to become friends with my burning? I accept the feelings of my heart just as they are. I connect with my deeper self.

Perhaps that is all that happens. But sometimes, something else happens too. My heart opens up, the emptiness becomes a doorway, and I fall into the fire of love. I feel held in the arms of tenderness. I feel that I am home. Sometimes, I find the answers to questions, and directions for my crossroads. Sometimes, as Rumi says,

Something opens our wings. Something
makes boredom and hurt disappear
Someone fills the cup in front of us
We taste only sacredness.⁵

This has been my experience of the inner journey. Hunger itself becomes a doorway into sacredness, into feeling a connection beyond my loneliness. Does it matter, on any particular day, whether I feel longing or feel love? Whether I feel questions or answers? The Buddhist mystics would say no. What matters is that I am becoming conscious. Thich Nhat Hanh says, “If we want to enter Heaven on Earth, we need only one conscious step and one conscious breath.”

The spiritual path is a path of waking up our awareness. It demands that we trust our experience, become friends with our burning. It does not matter if your hunger is a different hunger than mine: you must trust your own hunger. We have many hungers as human beings: for beauty, for dignity, for freedom, for love. Jesus said, “Those who hunger and thirst for justice shall be satisfied.”

Rumi writes that our hunger itself is the proof of the existence of bread. Our thirst is the proof that there is such a thing as water. We know of the existence of air because of our hunger for breath in its absence. This holds true for our spiritual hunger and our spiritual thirst: they are meant to lead us to a bread of life, a water of life. When we follow these burning hungers, we find our way on our own spiritual path.

Frederick Buechner says, “Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. ...touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are sacred moments and life itself is grace.”⁶

Someone once described Unitarian Universalism as a hallway with many doors to the holy. But our temptation is to get stuck in the hallway, celebrating our freedom to choose whichever door we want, rather than to open any of them. To live a spiritual life we must actually open a door, and walk through to where it leads us.

To take that next step through the door can be rough for UU’s. We have given each other permission to explore the inner mysteries without dogma. But we don’t quite know how to

travel there together. Some of us carry old wounds of symbol and language from the difficulties of our pasts; we may bump up against prickly idolatries. We are suspicious of what might lie on the other side. We say we love mystery, but we are also uncomfortable with the irrational or unproven. How do we affirm each other's experience when those experiences may be very different from each other?

For example, one area where we find difference is in the experience of spiritual beings or entities. Some people relate vivid encounters with spiritual beings: gods or goddesses or angels or *spirits*. They describe a spirit world that is somehow beyond the everyday world, even though it may be infused in the physical world. Other people do not experience such beings, and find it inexplicable; contradicting everything else they know about the world. Might there be such a reality, beyond the veil of our ordinary senses? As Unitarian Universalists, we are not asked to *believe* in it, but to be open to the possibility that some people do *experience* it.

Other cultures tend to be more at ease about such phenomena. I have a friend who is Puerto Rican. In her culture, one of the ancient traditions brought from Africa is called *Santeria*. When my friend opens her awareness to her inner world, these images of her culture come to life. She sees the spirits of Elegba and Oshun and Oya, with vivid colors and songs that others in her culture also report. These spirit beings interact with her and have been very significant in her life. Who am I to say they are not part of reality, when her culture affirms and cherishes them?

My encounter with people of other cultures has made me more appreciative of the mysticism of my childhood, and ironically, also more skeptical. It has taught me how our cultural context shapes our experience, even at what we imagine to be the most intimate and personal levels. If as a child I felt the loving arms of Jesus in my inner soul, was that *real*, or was that merely what I had been taught to expect? When I learned about sexism in religion, I became suspicious of such male god images. I realized how much they were shaped by the external teachings of those in power. Spiritual images and experiences can shape our lives in both positive and negative ways.

When I was in college, I was part of the Catholic Pentecostal movement. Some of the Pentecostals were experiencing spiritual revelations that encouraged them to restrict leadership to only the men of the group. Was that a real divine message or was that the culture of sexism infecting what they experienced as the voice of God? I realized then how much we are influenced by the hidden assumptions of those in power. Spiritual images and experiences are not always positive. They can also have a negative impact on us, or on other people.

So, I am not saying we should not bring our thought to bear on our experience. Experience is not infallible. We must measure spiritual experience by the values and thoughtfulness with which we should measure all parts of our lives. But there are times when our reasoning may be confounded.

Let me tell you a strange story. My Puerto Rican friend fell in love with a white Episcopalian friend of mine who was a cynic about spiritual matters. Instead, she practiced her spirituality through the work of social justice. But she told me that when she fell in love with my Puerto Rican friend, her beliefs were challenged in an unexpected way. *She* began to see Elegba

and Oshun and Oya in her inner imagination. She said to me once, “Those Puerto Rican spirits don’t care if I don’t believe in them. They show up whether I want them to, or not.”

There is so much about reality that is mysterious and hard to explain. We rely on our experience, and the experience of others, to give us evidence about the world. If we acknowledge our own inner reality, then we must acknowledge the inner reality of others. That leaves us open to dimensions that might be difficult or impossible to measure. So while Unitarian Universalists do not require belief in the unproven, we do invite an attitude of reverence for all that is unexplained.

Perhaps this reverence was the root of Einstein’s genius and his appreciation of the world. His questioning hungers led him to open a door into scientific experimentation and mathematical reasoning, and he followed that pathway more deeply than most minds are able to fathom. He, too, became a friend to his burning. His vision has inspired and changed our lives, even if most of us could not explain the theories he developed.

Spirituality is not an escape from the world. It is about being in relationship more deeply to all that is. It is being full of awe and gratitude for all that is. As Einstein put it, “There are only two ways to live ...one is as though nothing is a miracle... the other is as if everything is.” To be spiritual means to pay attention to the miracle of everything. True spirituality leads to a life of love.

We don’t have to be a Rumi or an Einstein to enter a spiritual doorway. We only need to become friends with our own burning. We begin by giving attention to the inner dimension of our lives. If we engage our time only in the outer world of waking and sleeping, eating and working, buying and selling, we will not discover what is burning in the secret fire in our hearts. The inner dimension is the world of thoughts, feelings, and dreams; memory, imagination and desire. The inner dimension is what some have called the soul.

The poet D.H. Lawrence describes it this way:

This is what I believe: ...

That my soul is a dark forest.

That my known self will never be more than a little clearing in the forest.

That gods, strange gods, come forth from the forest
into the clearing of my known self,
and then go back.

That I must have the courage to let them come and go.

That I will never let mankind put anything over me,
but that I will try always to recognize and submit
to the gods in me and the gods in other men and women.

To be spiritual means to acknowledge the limits of what we can analyze and control, to be open to the wonders that emerge from the dark forest. To be spiritual means to pay attention to the mysteries all around us. May Sarton writes, “If one looks long enough at almost anything, looks with absolute attention at a flower, a stone, the bark of a tree, grass, snow, a cloud, something like a revelation takes place.”

So let us take a risk today—to befriend our hunger, to pay attention, to go through the doorway, to see what we might experience about our miraculous world.

Meditation:

I invite you to enter into a time of quiet meditation. It may help to close your eyes. Become aware of your breathing. Notice how you breathe in and out, in and out. This air is the air of birds and flowers and the tall trees that shade our sanctuary. Become aware of your body. Are you hunched or upright, leaning forward or leaning back? There is no need to change anything. Just be aware of what you are feeling in your body. Now turn your attention to the feelings you feel in your heart. Notice if there is a hunger in your heart... a burning desire. Again, there is no need to change anything or do anything. Just give it your careful and deep attention. Keep breathing into the hungers that you experience. Accept the feelings of your heart just as they are. Let yourself connect with your deeper self and follow where it leads you...

When you are ready, I invite you to gently take your leave of this inner world, and to shift your awareness back to the community around you.

Benediction:

“Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. ...touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are sacred moments and life itself is grace.”⁷

In the words of Meister Eckert, “If the only prayer you ever say in life is “Thank you” that is enough.”

¹ Copyright 2005 by Rev. Mykel Johnson and Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church. Permission to reprint must be requested from office@a2u2.org, and is usually granted.

² From *The Essential Rumi*, translated by Coleman Barks, (Harper San Francisco, 1995), p. 165-168

³ Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 77-78

⁴ UU Pamphlet, *UU Views of Prayer*

⁵ From *The Essential Rumi*, translated by Coleman Barks, p. 280.

⁶ From Frederick Buechner, *Now and Then*.

⁷ Buechner.